

Israel–Palestine: A chance to end the cycle of conflict

‘Conflict management’ and a complicit international community led to October 7. Only true compromise can lay the ground for a lasting peace, writes Yossi Mekelberg.

THE WORLD TODAY 2 FEBRUARY 2024 — 3 MINUTE READ

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All wars and conflicts experience watershed moments which carry with them great dangers and sometimes suffering and devastation. But they also create new opportunities for the sides involved to re-evaluate whether reverting to collective violence serves their interests, or if they should rather resort to the path of peace and reconciliation.

What will that watershed be in the horrific Israel– Hamas conflict that would persuade both sides to reassess their positions?

One conclusion from the collapse of the status quo between Israel and the Palestinians is that conflict management is a fallacy that has failed time and again. As a long-term instrument it at best buys time until the next round of violence begins.

More than 75 years of conflict between Israel and the Palestinians have seen periodic outbreaks of hostilities and periodic efforts to bring peace based on a two-state solution. For most of this time the focus has been on managing the conflict.

Lack of belief in a peace agreement

This exposes a lack of belief that a peace agreement laying to rest the differences between the two peoples can be reached. It also shows that the international collective security mechanism set up after the Second World War has failed in its mission to peacefully settle conflicts.

The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is an asymmetric one with the stronger side, Israel, more interested in injecting the notion of ‘status quo’. This has served its interests in letting it continue to build settlements in the West Bank with the aim of eventual annexation.

By controlling the Gaza Strip and encouraging divisions between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, Israel has ensured an independent Palestinian state remains a remote possibility while presenting the Palestinians as solely responsible for the impasse in the peace process. This apparent status quo also served those in Israel and in Palestine who were not prepared to make the compromises necessary to allow a two-state solution to work.

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Both sides found the international community complicit in their self-deception that the situation could not get any better, but it would not get much worse. This has allowed the international community to relinquish responsibility for resolving the conflict, something deemed unachievable by many of the actors within it and therefore not worth investing diplomatic, political or economic capital in when there are other

pressing issues.

Complementing this approach is the belief that everything has been done to resolve the conflict, one of the most enduring in modern history, which has simply proved intractable, and the only option left is to manage it and ensure any occasional flare ups are short and don't spread.

The attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7 and what followed amounts to a complete collapse of this paradigm. The consequences will reverberate for years to come.

As horrendous and inexcusable as Hamas's terrorist attack was, there is a real danger of drawing from it all the wrong conclusions. And palpable evidence of this is the deadly and destructive manner in which Israel is conducting the war, supported by certain elements in the international community, especially the US.

An unachievable objective

By setting an unachievable objective of 'destroying Hamas' while using the entire population of Gaza as expendable collateral damage, while other quarters portray Israel as an evil and genocidal state, any hope of ever reaching a peace is given up and replaced with a preference to manage the conflict as a long-term strategy.

October 7 was as much a conceptual failure as an operational one for Israel. Hamas's success in being able to prepare undetected for such an assault on the communities bordering the Gaza Strip was not only due to the sophistication of this Islamist organization. It was also the result of Israel's decision-makers falling into the trap they laid for themselves of believing that they were successfully managing the conflict.

The assumption that injecting money into Hamas-governed Gaza would pacify an explosive situation was wishful thinking. Economic improvement could never replace the desire of Palestinians to see an end of the occupation and recognition of their political, human and civil rights.

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It is difficult to understand what the Hamas leadership was hoping to achieve in committing such a grave atrocity. Despair at the miserable conditions the Palestinians have endured not only since the 1967 occupation but since the 1948 Nakba, is understandable and has provided the conditions for radicalization. Attempts to overcome the deadlock were only to be expected.

Nothing can justify committing atrocities against civilians by either side. However, the crux of the calamity we are now witnessing is the product of the failure to achieve a peace

agreement based on a two-state solution in which Jerusalem is the capital of both peoples, whereby every Israeli and Palestinian enjoys security and the Palestinian refugee issue is satisfactorily resolved.

A sense of hopelessness

Instead, the Israeli occupation is more entrenched than ever through military control. The settlement project that now comprises 700,000 settlers in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, and until the war broke out in the Gaza Strip, was completely controlled by Israel.

The sense of hopelessness goes some way to explain why the Palestinian issue has slid down the international community's list of priorities, and why Palestinians fear the recent normalization agreements between Arab countries and Israel mean the region, too, is less concerned by their plight.

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To make things worse, Israel now has the most right-wing coalition government in its history. Central elements of it are advocating the annexation of the West Bank, while at the same time weakening the democratic state and its society, and with this its military preparedness.

Meanwhile, Palestinians are unable to turn to the Palestinian Authority or Hamas, both of which seem more interested in maintaining their position of power, or to an international community that has lost interest.

Such a lack of leadership and hope is usually a recipe for disaster. Now that this has happened, both peoples can continue to manage the conflict, which will merely result in prolonged suffering. Or they could reach for an historical compromise which may not completely satisfy both sides but would meet both national aspirations and supply long-term security.

This will be their test when the war is over: to realize that 'status-quo' is temporary and 'conflict management' is deceptive.

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